

# Sea Kayaking

## Channel Islands National Park

### Santa Cruz Island

Outside Magazine's 2003 Family Travel Guide  
By Joe Yogerst

## Big Fun in America's Parks: Channel Islands National Park



Humpback whales breach the surface to feed (Corel)

### Humpback Whale Watch

Black-and-white finned giants that grow to 50 feet long and live up to 50 years cruise the Santa Barbara Channel between the park and the mainland. Summer is the best time to spot humpback whales, especially from ferries headed out to the islands. The plankton- and fish-rich waters fuel about one-third of the world's cetacean species—26 types of whales, dolphins, and porpoises.

"No way!" muttered Chelsea as we paddled our sea kayak toward a 20-foot arch on Santa Cruz Island. With waves roiling through the rocky opening--at the base of a massive cliff called The Elephant on the island's east coast--kayaking through the arch must have seemed challenging, if not downright impossible, to even the most daring ten-year-old.

Our paddle beneath The Elephant was part of a three-day weekend in Channel Islands National Park, off the Southern California coast 70 miles west of Los Angeles. The park's five islands--Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, San Miguel, Santa Barbara, and Anacapa--are pockmarked by hundreds of arches and caverns, roughly two-thirds of them along shore. As we discovered, each of these wave-forged openings in the coastal cliffs presents a unique navigational challenge. Seal Cave, with its rocky beach, is a refuge for harbor seals. Shipwreck Cave preserves the rusty remnants of a barge. Painted Cave, at nearly a quarter-mile long, is one of the world's largest sea caves.

Kayaking these marine caverns wasn't possible when I was growing up in Southern California: Most of the Channel Islands were privately owned, used as sheep and cattle ranches or hunting preserves. In 1980, the islands collectively became a national park.

Although they have similar natural histories, the islands are distinct. Anacapa is tiny, a razor-thin wedge of vertical rock topped by a lighthouse. Santa Rosa is known for its hundreds of ancient Chumash Indian sites and the remains of pygmy mammoths that lived almost 13,000 years ago. More than 50,000 seals and other fin-footed mammals--one of the world's greatest concentrations of pinnipeds--gather on San Miguel near Point Bennett. Isolated Santa Barbara Island, southeast of the main cluster, is for those who want to escape even the most minimal

vestiges of civilization. And Santa Cruz, with its deeply indented topography, is ideal for cavers and paddlers.

The Channel Islands are called the American Galápagos because of their variety and volume of wildlife. Humans, however, are more scarce. Although 30 million people dwell on the adjacent mainland, only about a quarter-million people make the trip out to the islands each year.

Chelsea and I have made the voyage several times. We've scrambled up grassy peaks and trekked richly wooded valleys in search of creatures, such as the island fox, found nowhere else on earth. We've snorkeled kelp beds to see garibaldi (the bright-orange state fish), cruised through pods of several hundred dolphins, and glimpsed three humpback whales. And we've camped along an isolated beach, the waves lulling us to sleep with notions that the entire California coast used to be this way: wild, remote, utterly unspoiled--and ripe for kayak adventures.

Despite her initial trepidation, my daughter maintained her cool as we slipped beneath The Elephant. She kept the jagged walls at bay with her paddle, and I carefully guided us through the swell. As we breached daylight again on the other side of the arch, she whirled around with a grin of triumph and an idea: "Let's go again!"

OUTFITTERS -- Aquasports (800-773-2309, [www.islandkayaking.com](http://www.islandkayaking.com)) offers single- and multi-day sea-kayaking trips along the Santa Cruz coast that include sea-cave exploration and hiking. Trips leave from Ventura Harbor; fees range from \$195 for a day trip to \$380 for a three-day trip with overnights at Scorpion Ranch, a camping area on the east side of Santa Cruz Island. Horizons West Adventures (562-799-3880, [www.horizonswestadventures.com](http://www.horizonswestadventures.com)) offers fly-in camping on Santa Rosa Island. Three-day trips cost \$485 per person, including airfare, meals, and tents.

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